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SUBJECT: QATAR MFA MINSTATE UNDERSCORES STRATEGIC ALLIANCE
WITH U.S.; DENIES STRATEGIC SHIFT TOWARDS THE RADICAL CAMP

Classified By: Ambassador Joseph E. LeBaron, for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

(C) KEY POINTS

-- MFA Minister of State Ahmed Al-Mahmoud (again) told Ambassador February 2 there had been no strategic shift in Qatar's approach towards the region, no tilt towards the radical camp. Qatar still followed a strategy of broad engagement throughout the broader Middle East, according to Al-Mahmoud.

-- Qatar continues to support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he said. It has not backed away from the Arab Peace Initiative.

-- Al-Mahmoud encouraged the U.S. to treat Qatar as a strategic partner, engage its leaders in dialogue, and not back the Amir into a corner.

-- Ambassador described to Al Mahmoud the rapidly rising concern in Washington that Qatar's recent actions indicated a decided tilt towards the more radical camp.

-- Ambassador also pointed out that Qatar plans to hold an Israeli "war crimes" conference only a few days after an annual forum on U.S. relations with the Islamic world. The "war crimes" conference should be turned off. (Al Mahmoud was unaware of the conference.)

-- Ambassador laid out the al-Jazeera feedback loop for Al-Mahmoud: Qatar bankrolls Al Jazeera which then inflames Arab public opinion which Qatar then uses to justify its diplomatic actions. That's destabilizing and dangerous to both our interests. (Al-Mahmoud made no substantive reply.)

-- Ambassador pressed for Qatar to send Gaza humanitarian aid through the PA, not/not Hamas. Al-Mahmoud thought UN channels would be more likely than PA channels (more on the issue in septel).

(C) COMMENTS

-- Qatar appears to be vacillating, in practice if not in policy, between its stance of broad engagement in the region and a shift towards the radical camp. The fighting in Gaza precipitated the vacillation.

-- To us, the most important thing Al-Mahmoud said was this: engage with Qatar, and don't back the Amir into a corner. That is studied advice from a high Qatari official well-disposed towards the United States.

-- Given all the military, commercial, and cultural equities we have here, there is a lot of ballast in the relationship, producing quite a bit of equilibrium.

-- But the political relationship remains troubled, volatile, and quite capable of significantly damaging these equities.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (C) Ambassador expressed to Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ahmed Al-Mahmoud February 2 Washington's concern that Qatar's hosting of the January 16 meeting on Palestine, at which the Iranian President, as well as Hamas and PIJ leaders, were present, signaled a tilt toward the radical camp away from Qatar's traditional policy of maintaining a broad range of contacts and open doors. Ambassador conveyed that U.S. officials were surprised and confused because the shift appeared to be strategic in nature. Hardening this impression was Qatar's expulsion of Israeli diplomats and closure of the Israel's trade office in Doha in the days following the January 16 meeting.

NO STRATEGIC SHIFT

¶2. (C) Al-Mahmoud assured the Ambassador that there was "no strategic shift" in Qatar's thinking. As proof he offered that moderate Arab states such as Lebanon and Morocco participated in the January 16 Doha meeting alongside the radical elements about which the U.S. was concerned. The aim of the meeting had always been to support the Palestinians in Gaza. Al-Mahmoud said Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had made a mistake by not attending. Had he attended, the "door would not have been opened for Palestinian radicals to

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sit at the table." Al-Mahmoud added that it is essential for the international community to listen to and deal with both Fatah and Hamas.

¶3. (C) Turning to the closure of the Israeli trade office, Al-Mahmoud underscored that Qatar chose to "suspend" its relations with Israel over Gaza (claiming, oddly, that some European countries had done likewise). He said his chief of protocol had told the Israeli trade representative that Israel's communications with Qatari officials would continue, as would Israeli visits to Qatar. Relations, he stressed again, had merely been "suspended." Al-Mahmoud said the GOQ ultimately closed the office due to "much pressure within Qatar" for the closure.

QATAR DOES NOT WANT TO LEAD;
PALESTINIANS ALWAYS CAME FIRST

¶4. (C) Ambassador said the U.S. does not want to see a new division in the Arab world of moderates and radicals that would set back the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. In recent weeks, continued Ambassador, the U.S. observed Arab consensus in decline and coordination fall at a time of critical humanitarian needs in Gaza. Making matters worse, Qatar announced in mid-January that it would host a conference on Israeli war crimes in Gaza. This conference, scheduled to occur in mid-February days after the annual conference in Doha on U.S. relations with the Islamic world, poses a policy dilemma for the U.S. Participation in the latter conference might not be well perceived once Qatar concludes that event and opens the war crimes conference.

¶5. (C) Avoiding comment on the Israeli war crimes conference, Al-Mahmoud rejected the idea that the Arab world is returning to a "Cold War mentality." He said Qatar merely is looking out for itself and cannot count on others to identify and protect Qatar's interests. Al-Mahmoud challenged Washington to take a critical look at "who is making statements of division and reconciliation. Some countries want us to follow them without thinking. This is not acceptable to us. We will follow with the right but not the wrong," he

stressed. He added that Qatar is a small country and does not want to be a leader of the Arab world.

¶16. (C) Emphasizing that the "Arab street" from the outset of the incursion demanded a meeting of the Arab League to address Israelis actions in Gaza, Al-Mahmoud said it would have been better for the U.S. and its allies to have agreed to a meeting early on. The alternative was that Iran would call the shots, which is precisely what happened, claimed Al-Mahmoud, when Tehran called for an Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) summit on Gaza. The Amir countered by inviting OIC countries to Doha. Al-Mahmoud added that Senegal's President, as the head of the OIC, called on all Arab leaders to attend the summit in Doha, even if there was no quorum. To seek balanced representation, Qatar invited Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, and Malaysia to participate as observers alongside the Arab states.

¶17. (C) Even when the leaders of the Arab League did not come in force to Doha -- and chose instead to address the Gaza crisis at a previously scheduled economic meeting in Kuwait -- Qatar did not balk. Qatar participated, because Qatar's primary concern from the beginning was the Palestinian people, said Al-Mahmoud. It was the Egyptians who prided themselves in Kuwait on blocking the Arab League meeting in Doha from occurring. Al-Mahmoud added that several Arab leaders told the GOQ they would have liked to attend the January 18 meeting but for "external pressure." Al-Mahmoud said Qatar appreciates President Obama's statement that he wants relations "of mutual interest and mutual respect." For this reason, Al-Mahmoud encouraged the U.S. not to push Qatar and its Amir into a corner. He reiterated that Egypt need not have "taken credit for causing the Doha meeting to fail."

AL JAZEERA AN IMPROVEMENT OVER THE PAST

¶18. (C) Taking Qatar's point that much of what Qatar did in January was in response to Arab public opinion, Ambassador observed that Qatar nonetheless shaped and influenced Arab opinion through the Al Jazeera satellite network. How, he asked, does Al Jazeera's push for Arab governments to take a harder line on Israeli actions in Gaza square with Qatar's grand strategy of maintaining dialogue with all sides, including Israel?

¶19. (C) Al-Mahmoud argued that it is impossible to control Al Jazeera's broadcasts entirely. He considered Al Jazeera's existence a sign of progress. Gone are the days, such as

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when Iraq invaded Kuwait, that GCC governments withheld news of the invasion from the people. The Arab world now has an alternative to the BBC, and this is a sign of progress, said Al-Mahmoud.

QATAR: ENGAGE HAMAS

¶10. (C) Ambassador urged Qatar to make generous pledges to UNRWA and Palestinian civilians in Gaza. Ambassador also pressed for Qatar to send Gaza humanitarian aid through the PA, not/not Hamas. Al-Mahmoud said he believed, but could not confirm, that Qatar's aid would go through UN mechanisms. Al-Mahmoud said most important is getting the aid to the Palestinian people. The advantage of the UN was that "politics" would not block these chaQels.

¶11. (C) Continuing on the subject of politics, Al-Mahmoud stated that holding elections in Gaza had been a mistake. Noting that Hamas has shifted position from fierce non-recognition of Israel to recognizing Israel within its 1967 borders, Al-Mahmoud opined: "If friends of the U.S. had pushed Hamas to make the right choices (earlier) we would be better off today." It is important, in Qatar's view, to get Hamas on board with signing a peace agreement with Israel.

Isolating Hamas is a mistake and will not achieve this.

¶12. (C) Ambassador noted that Australia, Japan, Europe, and the United States all consider Hamas to be a terrorist organization. Israelis have not forgotten Hamas suicide bombing operations against Israelis. Al-Mahmoud responded that both Israel's "invasion of Gaza" and the suicide bombings were wrong. He reiterated Qatar's commitment to a two-state solution.
LeBaron